

Chapter 2

In the Mind of the Strategist: Identifying the Strategy Applied to the Target Acquisition System*

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Abstract: The strategic scope of the impact exerted by Colombian Special Forces units has allowed them to be recognized as a relevant tool that can be employed in military operations. The achievement of strategic objectives is the result of a combination of experience and the application of doctrine. This creative thinking, developed by Special Forces strategists, has enabled their tactical and operational development. This study describes the systemic approach to strategy applied to one of the critical capabilities of Special Forces operations: surgical strikes. Using the DOTMLPF military scientific method, the capabilities built by the Colombian Special Forces are analyzed. Finally, a conceptual model is presented that identifies the strategic capabilities of the process, drawn from case studies with interoperable characteristics for other Special Forces units.

Keywords: target acquisition; operational art; strategy; interoperability; special operations.

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Introduction

The organizational architecture of the Colombian Special Operations Forces (hereinafter SF) has been characterized by its constant evolution to carry out unconventional operations. These modifications have enabled them to adapt to prevailing factors in the contemporary operational environment, including the evolving threat landscape and the most adverse, hostile, and dynamic geographic environments. Furthermore, the constant evaluation of threat systems has enabled them to identify tactical actions that are unique in terms of time, space, and purpose, thereby achieving strategic impact objectives in non-permissive, uncertain, and denied environments.

Specifically, this work addresses the evolution of the tactical capabilities of the SF from a scientific perspective, as described in military doctrine as DOTMLPF: Doctrine, Organization, Training, Material, Leadership and Education, Personnel, and Facilities.¹ Furthermore, it is taken into account that although the application of the strategic level—in which interdependence and integration are managed—has been customary in operational art, this does not blur its importance in teaching processes, which is used by models such as that of the United Kingdom (Montero et al., 2019).

In this regard, given that this British model has also influenced the procedures, tactics, and techniques of SF, the question that motivated this study is the following: How do the characteristics derived from the target acquisition process of the Colombian SF organization to achieve strategic objectives guarantee a degree of interoperability with other SF?

¹ In the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), they may include an "I" to refer to "Interoperability."

To examine this question, this chapter addresses the evolution of the strategy employed by SF within the strategic conceptual framework. It also analyzes how the latter adapted to the needs of conflict and security and defense policies, since these public policies inevitably shape the designs of the “how” and the “desired end state.” Subsequently, the capacity of SF is studied with the aim of contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the Colombian case. For this purpose, the DOTMLPF is used, as the SF organization sought to refine all components of this methodology to ensure a successful target selection process.

Finally, based on a descriptive case study approach, the characteristics of the target acquisition process used by SF are analyzed to ensure effectiveness and interoperability within the Armed Forces. Furthermore, this chapter studies how this model contributes to achieving the strategic objectives of the Higher Command.

The descriptive horizon proposed in this chapter aims to illuminate the unique approaches that the SF strategy employs to develop a military operation. The analysis of specific cases was carried out following the guidelines of the method designed by Yin (1989, as cited in Martínez, 2006), who states that case studies can be descriptive “if the aim is to identify and describe the different factors that influence the phenomenon under study” (Martínez, 2006, p. 171).

Furthermore, this academic document aims to provide references for the *Special Forces Campaign Manual MCE 6-05, Integration, Interoperability, and Interdependence of Special Forces*, which will become a doctrinal document that projects the combat efficiency of SF in their dynamic interaction with conventional forces units and SF of other components of the Military Forces to execute joint and combined operations.

According to the *Army Fundamental Manual MFE 3-05, Special Forces Operations* (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017a), the classification of operations may include *Joint Operations* when carried out with other forces, for example, the SF of the Army and the SF of the Navy, and *Combined Operations* when executed with foreign allied countries. The latter is the case of the Panamax exercise, a military operation conducted by the U.S. Southern Command aimed at developing a deterrent capability against any threat to the Panama Canal.

Contemporary Retrospective Description of the Colombian Special Forces Organization

Colombian specialized literature has identified unique success factors that are essential to ensuring the relevance of Special Operations within the framework of national and general military strategy. Among the available academic works, it is of utmost importance to mention the study published by the Escuela Superior de Guerra "General Rafael Reyes Prieto" (ESDEG) entitled *Land Power: 21st Century Armies and Wars*. This study identifies some conditions of the political-military environment at the strategic level that should be considered among the success factors, such as "the identification of critical enemy capabilities to formulate effective military strategies, [...] and the transformation of the Armed Forces and their capabilities through innovation" (Montero et al., 2019, p. 122).

In this regard, it is appropriate to mention at this point the two critical capabilities that SF has developed in the context of the Colombian conflict: surgical strikes and special warfare. These critical capabilities serve as a starting point for visualizing the SF's approach to innovation in target selection and why it can be successful.

The SF organization has maintained substantial and sustained growth since 1970, when the 29th Infantry Battalion "Rifles" was transformed into the "Hermanos Almeyda Special Forces Group," the first unit with unique capabilities (Muñoz & Cano, 2020). This process enabled a transformative innovation in the military capabilities of SF, which revolutionized the way land power was utilized. This comprehensive transformation has allowed the SF organization to remain at the forefront in meeting the demands of safeguarding security and defending national sovereignty. In addition to these changes, SF has been able to transcend its limitations thanks to its alignment with the various security policies of the Executive Branch, which allows it to become a versatile option for targeting centers of gravity across the full range of military operations.

In August 2002, the Democratic Security and Defense Policy (2002–2010) emphasized the importance and projection of robust intelligence with coordination and integration capabilities to ensure its efficiency. Specifically, the doctrine refers to this aspect as *interdependence*, which is defined by the *Army Fundamental Reference Manual MFRE 3-05, Operations*, as the relationship of dependence between elements to maximize their complementary and reinforcing effects (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017c).

However, security policy enables the alignment of national security strategy interests with the government's strategic objectives. Thus, in 2002, the Executive Branch established that intelligence collection, analysis, and dissemination systems should be improved to ensure operational synergy, allowing the Armed Forces to gather information and operate in a timely manner to achieve objectives with strategic implications.

Aligned with this strategic vision, in 2002, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces issued the order to create an inter-institutional group called "Cancerbero," an actionable intelligence element comprising the National Army, the National Navy, the Colombian Air Force, the National Police, and the Administrative Department of Security (DAS). The permanent objective of the group was to neutralize High-Value Targets (HVTs) using the critical capabilities of SF.

Without a doubt, within the context of strategy, a purpose was established by the strategist in its design and operational art as the desired military end state. They inevitably found it necessary to optimize existing resources and introduce an innovative and decisive capability: long-range reconnaissance, so that the design and implementation would allow SF to execute operations with intelligence collected by themselves.

As organic units of the Army Special Operations Command (ASOC), the Army Command recognized the need to establish a unit comprising small groups capable of conducting special reconnaissance and direct action operations. Thus, units were formed with personnel from the 1st Special Forces Battalion, and other National Army units were invited to participate in the selection process. The latter benefited from the advice of the United States military group, which provided high-tech equipment and specialized materials that enabled them to operate in militarily denied environments, such as communications equipment with satellite technology.

Thus, the 1st "Ambrosio Almeida" Commando Battalion was established, a unit with almost legendary abilities, known as the ghosts of the jungle—individuals with perseverance and self-control that were hard to imagine at the time. Moreover, their skills in HVT reconnaissance were only rivaled by their innovative organization. In this way, small, self-sufficient teams began to set a milestone in the development of special missions.

However, given that such a small unit requires immediate reaction forces with airborne and airstrike capabilities inherent to its organization, a unit was created in 2003 with the most characteristic features of the Colombian soldier: tenacity and combat drive. Thus, overwhelming combat power, agility, and versatility were the

distinctive and inherent capabilities of the Airborne Lancers Group (AGLAN) in its creation and activation.

To achieve HVTs, which is the desired end state, an innovative set of conditions was created, consisting of a scalpel (the Commando Battalion, BACOA) and a hammer (the AGLAN), units that excelled at executing surgical strikes at the time. During that period, the critical intelligence needed by commanders at all levels was provided by teams that delivered information about areas inaccessible to other units and even other institutional capabilities.

During that same year, the need to add units with specific skills to improve the COESE became clear. On May 17, 2005, the Urban Anti-Terrorist Special Forces Group (AFEAU) and the Marine Infantry Special Forces Battalion (BFEIM) joined this command. As a result of this organization, the Unified Special Operations Command (CUNOE) and later the Joint Special Operations Command (CCOPE) were established.

With the creation of these units and under the operational command of the General Command of the Military Forces (CGFM), the strategic management of narco-terrorist organizations was affected by the neutralization of middle-level commands. However, the mission of attacking their center of gravity, i.e., the HVTs, was not fulfilled (CCOES, 2014).

As a result, processes of transformation and innovation began within SF. Following a visit by the Colombian Minister of National Defense to the Israeli Army, the National Special Operations Planning and Intelligence Group was implemented, based on the Israeli model envisioned for 2007. In this context, the Joint Special Operations Command was established by order of the CGFM, comprising 22 officers, 24 non-commissioned officers, and two civilians, all of whom were members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Police, and DAS (CCOES, 2014).

Thus, during 2007 and 2008, the center of gravity of the narco-terrorist organization known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was affected through the planning and development of special operations. Among these, Operation "Sol Naciente" stands out, demonstrating the integration of SF units and the effectiveness of the Air Force (Brigada de Fuerzas Especiales, 2015).

To enhance the capabilities of SF units, external advice was also sought to establish a special operations command. Thus, in September and December 2008, meetings were held with various personalities and advisors from other nations to make memorandums of understanding, develop the initial guide, project the mission and vision, and obtain approval from the recommended organization. This

work continued until January and February 2009, during which the organizational structure, roles, and specific functions of the CCOES were consolidated. Finally, on May 27, 2009, the CGFM deactivated the Joint Special Operations Command (CCOPE) and created the Joint Special Operations Command (CCOES).

In this evolution, it is also important to mention the Strategic Review Committee meeting held in 2014, where key goals were established, including updating doctrine and adopting capabilities-based planning, to define the future of SF and maintain its leadership position. Subsequently, in 2016, the current military doctrine was established, which defines Special Forces Operations as one of the distinctive competencies of the National Army (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2016b).

During 2015 and 2016, the CGFM began consolidating the organizational structure of SF. Through the publication of force resolutions and provisions, the CGFM eliminated and restructured some of the most emblematic SF units within its command—the men considered best prepared for war and to confront threats against the Colombian State.

Finally, in December 2016, the Commander of the National Army created the National Army Special Forces Division (DIVFE). As can be seen, in the context of strategic thinking, the pragmatic nature of the strategic culture employed by the Colombian SF is evident, as its sound decisions and evolution have enabled it to adapt and innovate in scenarios characterized by high volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This is how Gallardo and Faundes (2014) describe it: "In addition to understanding the context, strategic thinking seeks guidelines to influence and shape the scenario" (p. 10).

Analysis of the Colombian SF's DOTMLPF Capability and Its Interdependence with the Target Acquisition Process

First, it is worth highlighting that the target selection and prioritization process is the result of capacity building; therefore, it is essential to describe the capacity that the National Army has built, based on a few key pillars and taking into account its capabilities and limitations (Figure 1). In compliance with the guidelines established by the Ministry of National Defense (MDN) in this planning model, the SF organization optimized the resources assigned to it and evolved around a prospective vision of threats. In this way, it not only adapted but also developed a

competence that the National Army declared distinctive in 2016 (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017a).

Figure 1. Capacity-Based Planning Methodology



Source: MDN (2016).

The capacity analysis used by SF to select and prioritize targets will be conducted from a comprehensive DOTMLPF perspective, which encompasses a scientific methodology employed by the National Army to evaluate, innovate, and modernize capabilities. This tool also covers the doctrine, organization, material, personnel, and infrastructure available to the unit to develop its critical capabilities, such as special warfare and precision strikes.

Doctrine

The new doctrine of the National Army defines Special Operations (SO) as military actions conducted by organized, trained, equipped, and certified units, which can execute actions in hostile, militarily denied, and politically sensitive environments (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017c).

Among SO, a series of operations are distinguished that, in turn, are part of the two critical capabilities of SF: special warfare and surgical strikes. These two critical capabilities are developed within a common and interoperable framework according to clear parameters and guidelines, which allow them to integrate and employ concepts of organization, planning, and execution to carry out SO successfully.

The men of the SF of the National Army are governed by rigorous military standardized documents that define the tactics, techniques, and procedures to be

employed by units of a different, "special" nature. These documents transcend the pillars that sustain the organization's legitimacy and constitute its doctrine, which the *Army Fundamental Manual MFE 1-01* defines as the "fundamental principles with their relevant tactics, techniques, procedures, and terms used for the guidance and conduct of military operations" (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2016a, p. 1). For the SF organization, these principles are translated into standardized documents at the local and regional levels, with the aim of ensuring that allied Military Forces have a common, interoperable language within the shared framework for developing combined operations.

The experience gained from the Colombian conflict has contributed to the development of this current doctrine, as noted by Active Reserve Colonel Pedro Rojas Guevara (2017), director of the National Army Doctrine Center between 2015 and 2018, a master's degree holder in National Security and Defense, and an analyst and lecturer in security and defense issues. In his article "Doctrina Damasco: eje articulador de la segunda gran reforma del Ejército Nacional de Colombia," he states:

The current doctrine of the Colombian Army is the product of a combination of influences derived from fifty years of armed conflict. Apparently influenced by the United States in its formal aspects, its development has been more closely tied to the facts within an asymmetric context than to theory. (Rojas, 2017, p. 114)

It is then evident that these documents have not only facilitated the conceptualization of the bold and innovative actions performed by SF units but also include categories of information that describe the execution of the processes, that is, the know-how of the critical capabilities of SF. Specifically, Llobregat (2007) and Vilorio et al. (2008), as cited in Castaño and Arias (2015), explain that the "organizational know-how includes the knowledge, processes, procedures, and techniques that lead to the achievement of a service that is different and difficult to copy by other organizations" (p. 154). In this regard, the main documents that summarize this knowledge are:

- Army Fundamental Manuals (MFEs), which outline the philosophy of SF, their principles, foundations, and imperatives, as well as the characteristic elements of the operational environments where they can be used.
- Army Reference Manuals (MFREs), which consist of more detailed doctrinal documents that describe the types of operations that SF can execute

and their planning methods. Furthermore, they refer to the operational-tactical level and demonstrate both the capabilities and qualities of the SF organization.

- Field Manuals (MCEs), which explain the specific capabilities of SF operations and expand on the information contained in MFREs on specific capabilities. The MCEs build upon the concepts that the organization needs to further develop.
- Army Technique Manuals (MTEs), which describe in detail the non-mandatory methods used by military units to carry out missions assigned by higher commands. These techniques are applied in a disciplined manner, based on the operational conditions imposed by the scenario.
- Military Training Manuals (MEMs), which provide very precise technical specifications detailing the specific tasks to be performed. An example of this type of document is a manual that describes the techniques and procedures used in a military free-fall jump operation, a procedure that requires precise knowledge and expertise.

Organization

SF comprises around 4,000 special operators with critical capabilities in surgical strikes and special warfare; however, specific locations that characterize their participation cannot be highlighted due to circumstances related to their organizational architecture. As part of the land component of the CCOES, they do not have an assigned theater of operations because it is a Functional Joint Command, a status that allows them to conduct operations throughout the national territory, subject to efficient execution times that guarantee the military response required by the strategic objective.

Specifically, the DIVFE was established in 2016, and together with other components of the Air Force and the National Navy, it represents a strategic trident for the Colombian Military Forces, reflecting the organization's interoperability, interdependence, and collaborative nature through the CCOES. These characteristics are part of the organization's DNA, allowing it to exploit unique and exclusive capabilities, as well as strategic resources, in a decisive manner at the right time and place across the full range of military operations.

Furthermore, the DIVFE, as the land component of the CCOES, is supported by a modern and functional structure to meet all the requirements imposed by SO to be conducted by SF, as it is the unit responsible for centralizing their planning.

In its ongoing quest to refine the target acquisition process, the DIVFE utilizes a system described by the acronym F3EAD: focus, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate. This cycle enables it to anticipate and decipher ambiguous scenarios in which the threat may operate (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017a).

This process enables the DIVFE to identify, locate, and neutralize the threat, as well as conduct analyses subject to strict judicial procedures and prospective studies on the modus operandi of the terrorist threat. Furthermore, its application enables the implementation of a target selection and prioritization process (TSP) through rigorous dynamic assessments, allowing it to conduct intelligence preparation of the combat field (IPB) in alignment with the critical information requirements necessary for commander decision-making.

In this process, it is important to highlight that SF has developed a unique and exclusive analysis tool, vital in the context of the Colombian Military Forces: the Special Operations Planning Tank (TPOE), which acts as a bridge between the art and science of warfare. Specifically, the TPOE is a functional unit composed of personnel with expertise in evaluation and foresight, who form highly trained and versatile teams with the capabilities needed to analyze the various operational environments in which the SF battalions will operate (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017c).

The TPOE proposes potentially viable courses of action for executing an operation using war games and various matrices, enabling science to assess whether the mission variables are adequately considered. For instance, since meteorology plays a crucial role in the insertion and extraction of units during an airstrike, the TPOE investigates patterns and matrices related to atmospheric conditions in this planning cycle and, with the assistance of an expert meteorologist from the Colombian Air Force, identifies the optimal windows or times to carry out the operation. As demonstrated, at this level of military power, joint operations are essential.

It should be noted that the TPOE's strongest capability is defining and preparing the operational environment affecting an operation. Its ability to identify the critical requirements and values in that ecosystem is demonstrated by its expertise in detecting constraints, needs, initial requirements, characteristics, and properties of the terrain, as well as the weather in a geographic area. In other words, the TPOE not only determines "what" but also all the factors that can influence mission execution, which is undoubtedly crucial for developing dynamic and suitable courses of action for SO.

Furthermore, its ability to analyze terrain and its effects on actions is vital for executing operations. Because of this, the TPOE's creative and critical thinking continuously evolves to improve their capacity to conduct the military decision-making process and, therefore, achieve early integration with the target construction premise.

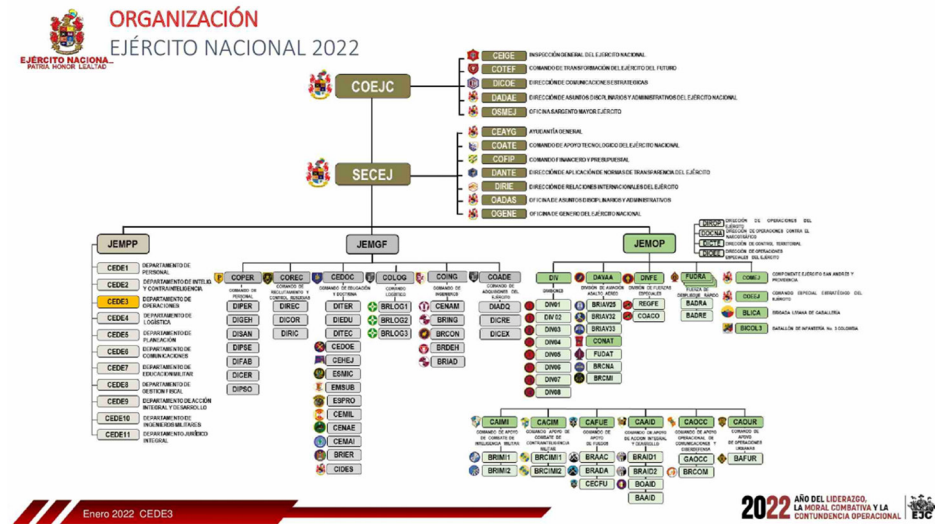
In this context, TPOEs are responsible for carrying out the SF Operations Processes, which consist of a series of steps to analyze and determine courses of action for decision-making. This enables them to accurately assess and mitigate risks in the execution of missions carried out in various operational environments against High-Payoff Targets (HPTs) and their centers of gravity throughout the country.

Based on the work of the TPOE, it can be noted that the DIVFE has extensive experience, as reflected in the planning of more than 200 SF operations, and that its structure enables it to execute joint operations with units that, under the command of the CCOES, are interoperable. This is precisely one of the greatest strengths of the land component, which, within the combat-generating structure, reports to the Army Deployment Command. For their part, units assigned to the CCOES can be used in any operation through command relationships established by the organization. So, if a commander needs, for example, specific waterborne infiltration skills, such as K-DUCK or K-DROP, they can request that the CCOES provide special reconnaissance teams from the Marine Infantry Special Forces Battalion within the planning process, and they will be assigned.

As shown in Figure 2, the DIVFE is subordinate to the Chief of the Operations Staff as a force-generating element, but its combat-generating element and ground component depend on the CCOES. In this respect, the DIVFE is a larger operational unit with a wide range of capabilities that it develops based on the continuous employment of its battalions. These skills in planning, preparation, execution, and ongoing assessment of different operational environments are described in its mission.

Finally, the DIVFE is also composed of SF regiments with airborne capabilities, which are its combat-generating element and a force-generating component. This dynamic and self-sufficient organization allows the commander to keep SF units operationally active without impacting their training and sustainment cycle.

Figure 2. National Army Organization Chart



Source: Ejército Nacional de Colombia (2023).

Materials

The acquisition of materials used by the Special Forces Organization is carefully planned by a DIVFE planning department, which conducts a thorough process with the ultimate goal of ensuring that the equipment and improvements are implemented properly and on time. This is outlined in the CCOES structural book for the Odiseo project, where material acquisitions are carried out in an organized and comprehensive manner to guarantee the interoperability of the acquired materials.

The operational capabilities of SO units depend on a strong satellite-based communications system that is compatible with allied countries in the Western Hemisphere. This technology helps synchronize products so they can operate together efficiently, enabling the exchange of information. This innovative CCOES communications system allows it to connect units at the tactical level to command and control at the strategic level, thereby enhancing mission command in the execution of SO. In this scenario, real-time data and voice transmission are crucial for carrying out its key capabilities.

The land component of the CCOES (specifically the DIVFE) has the necessary equipment to carry out SO involving aerial assets. Being part of the CCOES enhances the DIVFE's combat capabilities, enabling it to operate with a strategic fleet in support of the Colombian Air Force. This high level of interdependence

allows it to reach launch bases across the country and access remotely piloted aircraft systems and aircraft with intelligence capabilities, giving it advantages in the electromagnetic spectrum that ensure operational initiative. While these units are equipped with state-of-the-art weapons, the most important aspect is not the hardware but the software, as the saying goes.

Staff, Leadership, and Training

Throughout its history, the National Army has developed a comprehensive doctrine, robust infrastructure, and strong values, contributing to the formation of military leaders with the necessary capabilities to conduct military operations at various levels of warfare, from tactical to strategic. The different types of training offered by the institution are outlined below.

Individual Training

Formal Preparation

It is the one received in the different schools and training centers of the National Army:

1. *"General José María Córdova" Cadet College (ESMIC)*: The alma mater of the National Army is responsible for thoroughly training future Army officers as platoon commanders and professionals in military science and other fields. It provides solid foundational skills in institutional principles and values for national development and security. ESMIC teaches officers tactical leadership of units and equips them with the skills needed to manage small units. This training helps develop abilities in planning, preparing, executing, and evaluating operations in hostile environments and difficult conditions, thereby enhancing their technical and tactical skills in commanding and controlling platoon- or detachment-sized units.
2. *"Sargento Inocencio Chincá" Military Academy of Non-Commissioned Officers (EMSUB)*: Its mission is to train future non-commissioned officers of the multi-mission Army in Military Training and Management Technology, so that they have the skills to command, instruct, and manage squads at the tactical level.
3. *Arms and Services College (EAS)*: The Army Command, through Regulation No. 007 of June 23, 1980, created this educational center to exclusively meet the institution's academic demands and structure the professional training of its command cadres. Thus, this college provides training and

specialization courses for promotion and techniques to officers of the arms and services, as well as technical training to non-commissioned officers. In addition, it establishes tactical and technical doctrine guidelines for arms and services up to the battalion level.

The mission of the EAS is to thoroughly train officers, junior officers, and non-commissioned officers of the Military Forces as commanders of basic units, such as companies, and as members of the general staff through the development, updating, dissemination, and implementation of doctrine at the tactical level to improve military operations and maneuvers that support the security, defense, and growth of the country.

4. *"General Rafael Reyes Prieto" War College (ESDEG)*: This is a higher education military institution (HEI) that trains senior officers of the Armed Forces. It works to develop skills and competencies by coordinating, integrating, and executing plans for joint decision-making.

Specialized Instruction

These courses are intended to specialize those who will execute SF operations and include: Lancer, Parachuting, SF, Jumpmaster, Aircraft Scout and Guide, High-Altitude Infiltration, High-Precision Shooter, Air Strike Master, and Security Swimmer.

Furthermore, within the framework of interoperability and as part of cooperation programs with SF, the CCOES has developed advanced skills to execute advanced tactical infiltration operations. Thanks to this partnership, it has been able to train officers at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS) in these courses:

- a. *Military Free Fall JumpMaster Course (MFFJMC)*: The interoperable doctrine used by SF has enabled them to develop strengths in the advanced training required for this type of SO. This exclusive course, in which organic personnel from the DIVFE participate alongside expert officers in military free fall jumping, specializes in training jump masters to inspect free-fall parachutists, execute emergency procedures, operate supplemental oxygen equipment, plan insertion points and heights based on terrain analysis, give jump commands, manage guidance and capabilities of aircraft used for military free fall jumping (MFFJ), set impact or jump points, pack and inspect gear, perform emergency procedures for night navigation, prepare packing materials, weapons, and configure advanced military guidance systems. During MFFJ training, each student

plans and executes a nighttime operation, which includes jumping armed, equipped, and with supplemental oxygen. Students are subjected to rigorous evaluations at each stage of this training.

- b. *Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC)*: The USAJFKSWCS trains captain-ranked officers in this qualification course to integrate SF and, through exchange and knowledge transfer programs, appoints them as organic members within the select group of instructors that comprise the American institution. The course includes six sequential training phases designed to develop and profile the SF operator: 1) unconventional warfare; 2) small unit commander; 3) SF specialists or occupational model; 4) special warfare; 5) foreign languages; and 6) strategic planning and MFFJ training. Officers participating in this program focus on planning and executing courses of action related to distinctive SF operations.

Collective Training

This training combines all the capabilities of SF (direct action, special reconnaissance, and counterterrorism) as outlined in the annual training cycle, the Instruction and Education Plans (I&EP), and the Instruction and Training Plans (I&TP), which are developed based on operational needs. The technical and tactical tasks are performed both individually and collectively at each level, following the specialized organization of the unit conducting SO, as described below.

1. *Commando Training Battalion (BECOM)*: As a subordinate unit of the largest operational element of SF, it is responsible for individual and collective training of SF, developing doctrine, and handling all matters related to instruction; it conducts and sustains SF training programs; and offers basic and advanced individual training and education for SF members. BECOM trains, educates, develops, and maintains optimal readiness levels for SF. It is also charged with providing SF regiments with professional officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers who are skilled, highly educated, innovative, and adaptable to diverse operational environments.

Infrastructure

As the SF organization grew in size and capabilities, its ecosystem of planning, preparation, readiness, concentration, and revitalization in terms of infrastructure evolved to support agile environments. These environments allow special operators to access the services they need to meet specific objectives.

This modern infrastructure features facilities such as the CCOES smart building, which functions as an integrated hub for capabilities including intelligence and SO, as well as advanced command and control systems. These systems enable SF to maintain the demanding, ever-changing assessments necessary for their missions. At the tactical level, there is an SO complex called Odiseo, located at the National Training Center (CENAE) on the Toleraida military plateau. It houses two of the three SF military regiments along with other support units. Currently, Odiseo is envisioned as a center of excellence for training regional SO units and is where the elite teams that compete in the regional “Fuerzas Comando” competitions, of which Colombia has been the champion eleven times, receive their training.

This infrastructure enables the SF organization to provide essential services for revitalization, training, rest, and operational readiness, effectively supporting its military actions.

The Beginning of the End: The SF's Target Selection Process and Interoperability

Building a perspective on interoperability must begin by defining the term, which should be observable according to the National Army's doctrine manuals. Regarding its importance in SF manuals, the *Army Fundamental Reference Manual MFRE 3-37 Protection* warns that “fratricide may be more frequent during joint and multinational operations, when communications and interoperability challenges are not fully resolved and clear” (Ejército Nacional, 2017d, pp. 1–18).

However, although the *National Army Manual of Terms and Symbols* defines interoperability as the ability to operate in synergy when units execute tasks or missions assigned by a command (Ejército Nacional, 2017b), for this exercise, the much more specific approach of the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* of the U.S. Department of Defense is proposed:

interoperability – 1. The ability to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives. 2. The condition achieved among communications-electronics systems or items of communications-electronics equipment when information or services can be exchanged directly and satisfactorily between them and/or their users. (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021, p. 110)

According to Pablo Moreno (2014), in contemporary warfare, with current command and control structures and new forms of global threat, it is difficult to imagine purely specific land, naval, and air operations employing military capabilities independently, rather than what the interdependent nature of an SF operation demands (Moreno, 2014). As the conflict has demonstrated, operations have been carried out unilaterally. However, the desired effect can be maximized by integrating interdependence and interoperability into the joint nature of planning, which are determining factors in making a strategy efficient and effective for the operational commander.

Similarly, this quality allows it to carry out operations with precision, discretion, and scalability within any major operation or campaign, aligned with its strategic goals and two essential capabilities: surgical strikes and special warfare (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017a). It is important to note that response and execution time are critical when planning courses of action to meet strategic objectives. These qualities have enabled the Colombian SO Forces to excel in surgical strikes against strategic targets. These include the neutralization of Walter Patricio Arizala, aka Guacho, in Nariño Department in December 2018, as well as the operation against Fabián, leader of the Western War Front of the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group, in September 2021.

The skills acquired through the conduct of typical SF activities against hybrid threats have allowed the development of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) exclusive to SF that have served and will continue to serve as a benchmark for military strategists within the SF organization due to the boldness and effectiveness of the unique methods they employ.

According to Dr. Tom Searle (2017), special operations are those that are "outside the box" in terms of the conventional nature of military operations. In his *Special Operations Theory*, Searle (2017) argues that these are neither elite nor specialized; rather, their special quality means they are "different." Although its theory refers to unique capabilities and methods of employment, it is also pertinent to mention the creative thinking that allows for problem-solving from different perspectives, "generating new and useful ideas, reevaluating and combining old ideas to solve problems" (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2019). This integration of ends, ways, and means employed by commanders and their staffs is based on the comprehensive application of their skills, knowledge, and experience. Specifically, this cognitive approach is referred to as *operational art* (OPART) according to the *Army Techniques Manual MTE 5-01, Army Design Methodology*.

The evolution of SF in operational art, supported by their creativity, discretion, and judgment in the conduct of their activities, has enabled them to perform effectively in their missions and achieve high-reward objectives with significant efficiency.

Operational art is not directly related to a specific level of warfare, but can occur at both the tactical and strategic levels. Furthermore, it involves four essential elements: time, space, purpose, and the method or manner in which the strategic objective will be partially or totally achieved, so that the appropriate balance will allow the commander to retain, maintain, and exploit the initiative of his tactical action (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2019). In this regard, it can be clearly stated that operational art, critical thinking, and thinking outside the box are inherently multidimensional and interdependent arguments that enhance and maximize the planning and execution capabilities of operations of a “different” nature.

The evolution, interoperability, and “outside the box” nature of SF operations have enabled the concentration of strategies that adapt to the existing ambiguous operational environment. This adaptation is possible thanks to the constant and customary application of knowledge (art) to operational dynamics. This particularity has enabled SF to maximize the impact of applying experience to science, and consequently, achieve strategic military objectives that positively influence the overall military strategy (Centro de Doctrina Conjunta [CEDCO], 2018).

In turn, this dynamic allows SF to maintain an efficient level of performance in their training, readiness, and interoperability. To achieve these high standards, SF develops top-quality training plans and programs, which are evident in the success its units have achieved in carrying out operations. For example, we can mention the specific operation “Osiris,” which was carried out in October 2021 as part of the “Agamemnon” SO campaign against Darío Antonio Úsuga, aka *Otoniel*, the top leader of the Organized Armed Group Clan del Golfo. As the then-President of Colombia mentioned in a press conference at the Tolemaida Military Fort, this operation is “the hardest blow inflicted on drug trafficking in the 21st century and is only comparable to the fall of Pablo Escobar in the 1990s” (CNN en Español, 2021).

The commanders who have executed these types of missions have understood the concept of *strategy*: the science and art of planning to achieve strategic objectives determined by national interests, with the aim of decisively impacting national threats. Regarding political-strategic objectives, the *General Military Strategy Manual 3-34* establishes that to achieve political objectives, national strategic leadership must be considered through “the use of the fields of power” (CGFM, 1997). This strategic leadership, which establishes goals and allocates

forces and resources, thus provides a broader perspective than the commander's sole knowledge of the doctrine and capabilities of the men under his command. It also encompasses the combination of art and science to contribute to achieving strategic objectives (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2016a).

According to Professor Dale Eikmeier (2015), a professor at the U. S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, some differences can be considered between science and art:

- Art must be considered subjectively, and science objectively.
- Art is nonlinear and advances laterally; science is linear and progresses step by step, interacting vertically.
- Art is studied holistically as a whole; science divides the problem into parts to address it.
- Ultimately, art is the path, "the journey," while science is "the destination."

Hence, these two concepts are combined in different proportions in military strategy, so that success is to determine "when to act like a scientist and when to act like an artist" (Eikmeier, 2015).

As MTE 5-0.1 *Army Design Methodology: Art and Operational Design* (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2019) indicates, operational art can be applied at all levels of warfare by commanders and their staffs. It is manifested through plans and orders that describe how (forms) forces should employ their capabilities (means) to achieve the objectives imposed on them, what they call the desired end state, which transcendently represents the success of the mission (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2019).

The following is an overview of the concepts commonly used in SF Operations to execute a mission. Additionally, it explores what operational art describes as *science* and what the *scientist* would express, so to speak; that is, the commander in his planning. Specifically, these concepts would have the following information:

The *mode* of strategy refers, on the one hand, to how the commander of an SF unit, as part of a typical activity within his capabilities, designates an operation and a task, and on the other, to how he will employ the capabilities at his disposal to accomplish a specific strategic objective. The *means* refer to the air, naval, and special infiltration capacities that the commander requests during planning and that are allocated to him after an assessment. The *end* is to use these capacities to achieve the desired end state, which is science.

At this point, it is essential to note that to arrive at this operational concept, an *artist* has had to evaluate multiple courses of action within their military

decision-making process. That is, this commander, together with his staff, has deciphered a strategy to achieve a strategic objective.

According to this approach, such a strategy could be expressed through an equation: Strategy = Ends + Modes + Means (Luttwak, 1989). However, according to specialized literature, additional elements must be taken into account, such as the adversary's environment and strategy, which undoubtedly transcend the outcome of the equation (Álvarez et al., 2018).

Within the Range of Military Operations (RMO), SF has demonstrated its ability to execute actions not only at the joint force level, but also at the interagency, interorganizational, and multinational levels, for a multitude of missions ranging from SF training in host nations to the most significant combat operations at the local level.

As has been shown, SF is a versatile and efficient response at every point of the RMO, enabling them to provide the Colombian State or a host nation with deployable, agile operations that contribute to joint efforts to quickly reverse unstable conditions through ethical and decisive conflict resolution. However, these responses will always be conditioned by uncertain operational environments, as described in the National Army doctrine, which refers to the term VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity). This strategy, then, is conditioned by changing circumstances in an environment where luck and uncertainty predominate (Álvarez et al., 2018).

Now, in the operational context of SO, one observable factor in the strategists of the SF organization is intuition—not so much luck—which arises from a correct understanding of the operational variables that affect the mission. A proper understanding of the operational environment enables the strategist to devise dynamic approaches to a mission and to consciously and responsibly manage the operation's *tempo*. He knows that his assessment of a clue, an animal, or a footprint can significantly impact the success or failure of an operation.

In general, the National Army employs four primary activities in the operations process: planning, preparation, execution, and evaluation. These constitute a common denominator in the three planning methods that, according to the National Army's military doctrine, the SF organization employs: 1) the Army Design Methodology (ADM), 2) the Military Decision-Making Process (MPMP), and 3) the Command Procedure (CP). Although these scientific methods are applied at different levels, they are aligned and ultimately contribute to the same desired end state.

One of the factors that SF constantly evaluates within its distinctive capabilities is planning methodologies. In this respect, identifying the characteristics of the target acquisition process in SF Operations in a case study goes beyond what science dictates, as it is not linear. To better understand this point, it should be noted that interoperability has been developed to the extent that the institution's organizational culture identifies "the execution" of this process as its added value. This is one of the essential characteristics for achieving the success of its missions.

This planning process occurs at the operational level and is managed by the CCOES and the DIVFE. Although this activity is carried out at a higher level, it must be closely linked to execution at the tactical level to be effectively realized. This interdependence with different levels guarantees the success of the strategic objectives established in the General Military Strategy. Consequently, the CCOES and the DIVFE "construct" strategies to achieve targets based on what is considered a cornerstone: "Early Integration," defined as the result of a three-dimensional effort that combines the analysis of intelligence agencies and the forward-looking vision of planning and operations specialists to maximize the strategy's outcome.

Following this process, the strategies are translated into courses of action that emerge within the TPOE. This statement can be exemplified by the description given by the Commander General of the Military Forces at the press conference following Operation "Osiris," in which aka *Otoniel*, a feared drug trafficker and top leader of the Clan del Golfo, was neutralized:

This definitive operation against this bandit was planned for October 15, 2021. The Commander-in-Chief of the Military Forces met with National Police Intelligence, Special Operations, and Planning officers, resulting in a conceptual leap in the strategy used by the units to capture this bandit on October 23, 2021. (Noticias Caracol, 2021, para. 2)

This arrangement of capabilities shows the first factors that refer to conceptual planning:

1. Reception of information
2. Exhaustive analysis of that information and operational variables
3. Feasibility of the operation
4. Initiation of conceptual planning and development of operational reports that describe the purpose and means to achieve the desired end state
5. Approval by higher commands; at this stage, the operation can be redesigned according to the guidelines they issue.

6. Delivery of the operational report and initiation of military planning for decision-making. This process includes Early Integration and convenes the commanders of smaller operational units, known in the Colombian case as Special Forces Regiments. While this milestone marks the beginning of a step, the “parallel planning” developed by the units enables them to anticipate events or rehearsals, which must be planned in advance due to the time-constrained conditions under which this planning is carried out

It should also be noted that these steps also encompass several events within the target selection process, which are considered in the conceptual planning: 1) the initial planning that guides the commander's initial guidance, 2) the elements that determine the desired end state, and 3) the lines of effort that will lead to the mission's accomplishment. In this phase, the center of gravity of the operation emerges, constituting the defeat mechanism to be employed and triggering the elements that focus the detailed planning.

These aspects can be seen in the press conference given by the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces on Operation “Jupiter” against *Iván Mordisco*, in which he emphasized that,

[...] The President of the Republic needs a strategy with lines of action that bring together the capabilities of the Military Forces, including Intelligence, inter-institutional support with the Prosecutor's Office, and specialized training in units with surgical capabilities. (Semana, 2022, para. 3)

On that occasion, the Commander-in-Chief of the Military Forces also described some aspects of the missions that create an operational environment conducive to confronting Organized Armed Groups. Specifically, he noted that this configuration operation was carried out over nearly 24 months, demonstrating the level of participation of SF in the full range of military operations, which is referred to as a “Special Operations Campaign.”

During the execution of the Special Forces Operation “Jupiter” against terrorist *Iván Mordisco*, we report over 288 days of leveraging strategic intelligence; the involvement of more than 700 special operators with strict command and control; the assessment of approximately four areas of general interest; and the execution of 12 operational events. Consequently, the high-precision search and persistence, after covering 1,900 km, enabled the Military Forces to locate him in a specific area of interest for a surgical strike.

This joint, inter-institutional operation demonstrates interoperability and interdependence, the Air Force's analytical and attack capabilities, and the use of ground power through National Police SF and intelligence units. Several operational launch platforms were used, and the key task was maintaining the operation's legitimacy by following the relevant legal procedures.

Continuing with the conceptual analysis, the process of target planning, selection, and prioritization proceeds as follows:

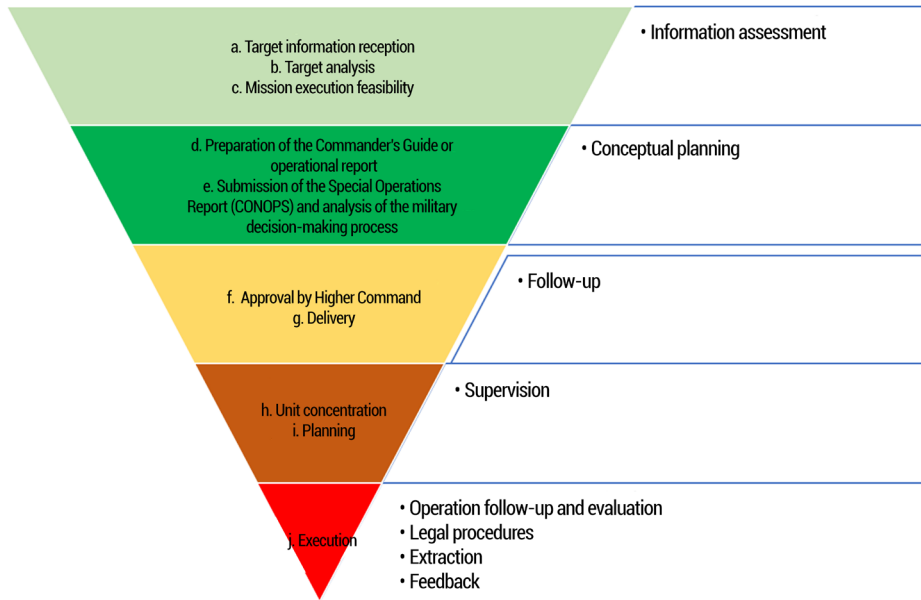
1. Concentration of technical, technological, and air means and SF units in locations that allow for mission accomplishment in terms of time, space, and purpose
2. Planning of maneuver units based on mission variables
3. Battle monitoring. The dynamic assessments conducted at this stage enable reevaluation of the tactics, techniques, and procedures necessary to effectively sustain the operational effort at crucial points in the mission.
4. Legal procedures, vital to ensuring the legitimacy of tactical procedures. This action is carried out in parallel throughout the planning process, is coordinated from the operational level, and directly influences the execution and subsequent evaluation of the mission.
5. Withdrawal of units, either to relocate them or to revitalize them and keep them operationally ready for new missions

Based on the above, Figure 3 summarizes the planning process for selecting and prioritizing the targets of the Colombian SF organization.

So, the effective analysis of this process must have characteristics that transcend the science of doctrine and include "non-tangible" elements (UNIMINUTO, 2012), which are strictly related to four relevant aspects of the definition of targets:

1. The execution of the strategy.
2. The credibility of the organization's leaders, i.e., the commanders, who, beyond strategy, formulate and design a strategic outlook to anticipate actions or turbulences that contingencies could dictate. These strategists must consider categories of information known in the military as *operational variables* and *mission variables*, which help them identify the actors involved and anticipate the risks of an operation.
3. The quality of the proposed strategy. This aspect relates to the distinction the National Army makes between planning methodologies, design methodologies, military decision-making processes, command procedures, and, finally, operational development at the tactical level.

Figure 3. Special Forces Planning Process



Note. The inverted pyramid design is based on a statement by Professor Humberto Serna Gómez, an expert in strategic planning. Dr. Serna refers to the top-down design and bottom-up execution of strategies (Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios [UNIMINUTO], 2012).

Source: Own elaboration based on the Army Campaign Manual MCE 3-18 Special Forces Operations (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2018).

The importance of including these aspects in the analysis lies in the fact that “more than 60 % of an organization [is made up of] those intangible elements, such as the principles of an institution” (UNIMINUTO, 2012).

It should also be noted that two types of advantages can emerge: a comparative advantage, which persists until another organization copies it, and a competitive advantage, which is inherent in the process that grants it a value chain. Specifically, the target selection and prioritization process represents a competitive advantage within the organizational culture of SF, as reflected in their human capital: “culturally cunning, regionally aligned, politically nuanced men, trained in mediation and negotiation, competent in interorganizational coordination, mature, and expected to operate autonomously” (Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2017a). This is the know-how that characterizes the interoperability process.

Conclusions

In all fairness, this academic work does not intend to emphasize the organizational proposals evident in the contemporary description of the history of SF. While this evolution enabled the creation of a strategic culture that guides the planning methodologies employed by SF, it is essential to highlight that the results are neither ambiguous nor obtained by chance. Instead, they derive from the synergy and interdependence of the capabilities within the system.

Thus, the research describes the target acquisition process in surgical strikes carried out by the Colombian SF. Furthermore, it demonstrates how their scope and successes are not merely the output of a tactical exercise but rather result from a mechanism that combines a capacity that was built geostrategically, as explained when addressing DOTMLPF. In this regard, these elements are not in themselves a factor of success. Rather, they participate in a process that requires innovation and broad understanding, so that these "notes" flow like a symphony that challenges the ambiguity of operational variables and allows the operation's *tempo* to be maintained.

Regarding the question that arose from this research on the SF's target selection processes, it is concluded that they are interoperable, as exemplified in two case studies: the major operation "Agamenón" and the operation against Walter Arizala, aka *Guacho*. These two SO demonstrate a high level of interoperability. The first campaign employed elements of the National Police, conventional forces, and SF, while the second mission involved forces from allied countries (Colombia and Ecuador) to achieve a common objective.

In this respect, the study of the SF's target selection process allows for the following diagnosis. Regarding interoperability, the DOTMLPF capability was built in alignment with regional interests and elements used by allied countries such as the United States. Indeed, the process that other organizations can employ to be successful must take into account elements that transcend the purely material.

The above leads to the conclusion that the characteristics derived from the target selection and prioritization process are "the organization's non-tangibles" and are represented in four important aspects for strategic planning: 1) the execution of the strategy, 2) the credibility of the organization's leaders, 3) the quality of the proposed strategy, and 4) the development of operations. This selection process, as Serna (UNIMINUTO, 2012) mentions, provides a competitive advantage for the SF organization. It is difficult to copy, endures over time, and generates added value, making it a distinctive competence of the Colombian National Army.

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